

# **WILDLIFE HARVEST AND POPULATION STATUS REPORT**

## **COTTONTAIL RABBITS - 2004**

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### **RABBIT ABUNDANCE**

Rabbit counts were conducted along roadsides by Conservation Agents during 1-15 July. Within each county (excluding Clay, Grundy, St. Charles and St. Louis) a 20-mile permanent route is driven at 30 mph. Rabbit abundance improved slightly over last year. The 2004 statewide rabbit count of 0.78 rabbits per mile is 4% above the count for 2003 (0.75), and 8% below the long-term average (0.86, 1983-2003) (Table 1, Figure 1). The 2004 young:adult ratio of 1.14 is 8% below the ratio for 2003 (1.24), and 31% lower than the 1986-2003 average (1.65).

Looking at rabbits on a regional scale, total counts were highest (>1.2 rabbits/mile) in the Northern Riverbreaks and Northeastern Riverbreaks zoogeographic regions, moderate (0.9 rabbits/mile) in the Northwestern Prairie, and low (0.44-0.64) in the Western Ozark Border, Western Prairie, Northern and Eastern Ozark Border, Ozark Plateau and Mississippi Lowland regions (Table 1, Figure 2).

In addition to surveying fixed routes, Conservation Agents provided their perception of rabbit numbers in each county. Their impressions are based on observations of rabbits over the entire county during April-June, observations of farmers, etc. In this evaluation, 7% of the counties were judged as excellent, 38% good, 42% fair, and 13% poor.

Prospects for the 2004 hunting season are good, with abundance being highest across northern Missouri. Also, abundance was close to the long-term average in the Ozark Plateau and Northern and Eastern Ozark Border regions, so hunting south of the Missouri River should be about average in those areas. Regardless of the region of the state, localized areas of good hunting can be found where habitat is suitable and nesting-season weather was mild.

### **2003 HUNTING SEASON**

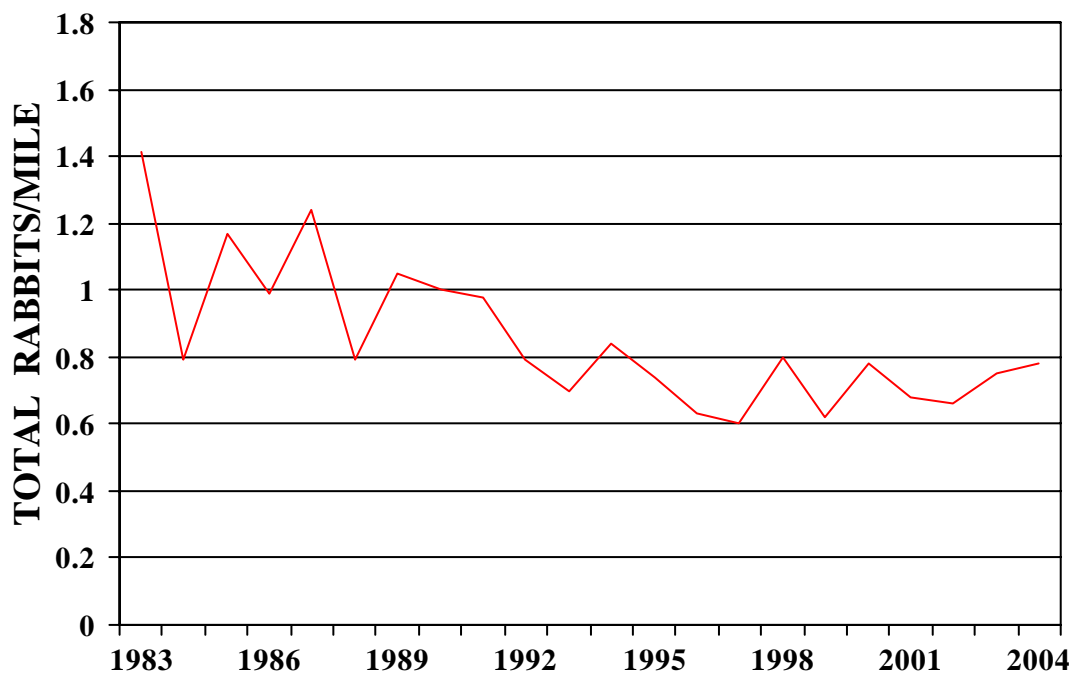
Harvest information is collected from a post-season mail survey of a random sample of resident and non-resident Missouri small game permit holders. Hunting season dates (October 1 through February 15) and the daily bag (6) were unchanged from previous years. The 2003 season harvest of 529,439 is a marked improvement over the past two years (Figure 3). Last year's harvest, however, is still 49% below the long-term average (1967-2002; 1,028,996). The low harvest of recent years is partly due to a decline in hunters. The estimated number of hunters in the 2003 season, 75,460, is slightly above the record low in 2002 (Figure 3).

Despite the reduced popularity of rabbit hunting, hunting success continues to be

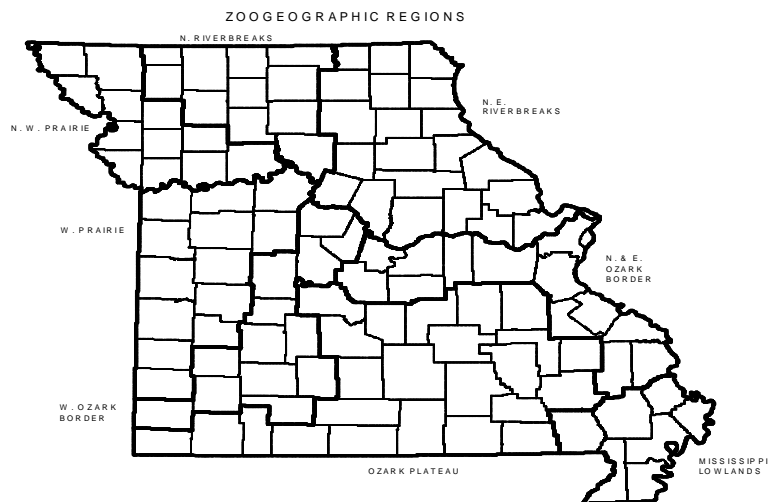
relatively good with the average daily bag in 2003, 1.3, being only 6% lower than the long-term average (1967-2002, 1.4 rabbits/day) (Figure 3). Also, rabbit hunting continues to provide a considerable amount of recreation with 418,281 days spent afield by rabbit hunters.

**Table 1.** Average number of rabbits counted per mile of road along 109, 20-mile routes during 1-15 July 2004 in Missouri.

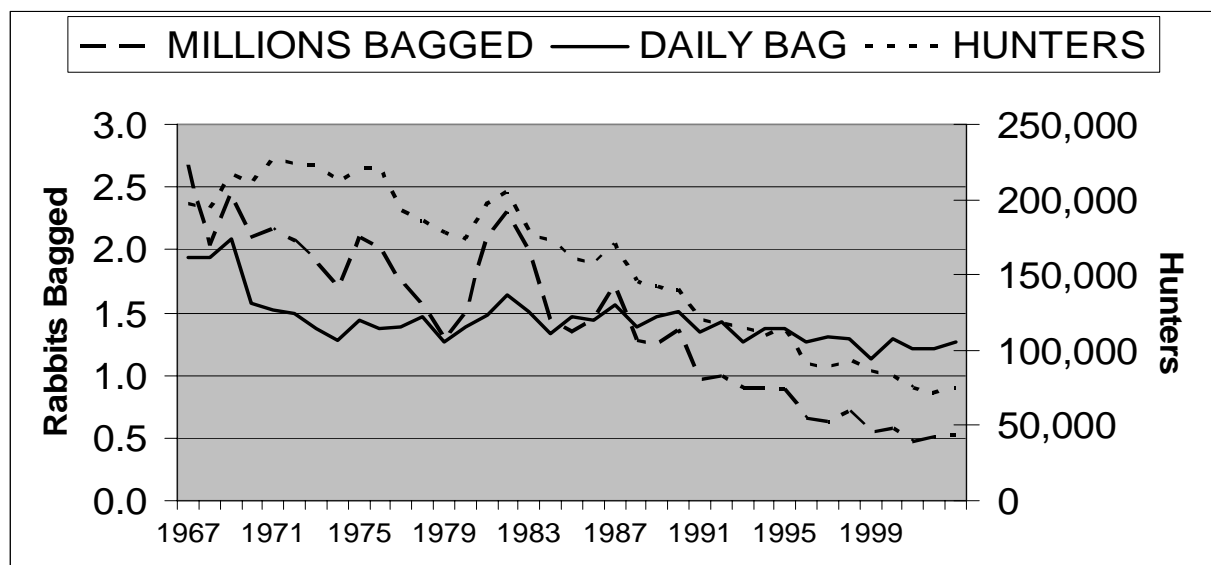
Zoogeographic Region	Routes	Young: Adult Ratio			Total Rabbits		
		2004	2003	1986-2003 Average	2004	2003	1983-2003 Average
Northwestern Prairie	11	1.46	1.04	1.69	0.90	0.72	0.75
Northern Riverbreaks	10	1.85	1.58	2.08	1.63	1.12	1.38
Northeastern Riverbreaks	19	1.2	1.24	2.09	1.25	1.16	1.13
Western Prairie	13	0.9	1.57	1.85	0.44	0.63	1.04
Western Ozark Border	13	0.77	1.27	1.53	0.64	0.74	0.94
Ozark Plateau	24	0.68	0.94	1.03	0.48	0.39	0.46
Northern & Eastern Ozark Border	12	1.02	1.18	1.41	0.55	0.67	0.55
Mississippi Lowland	7	0.97	0.94	1.36	0.47	0.52	0.77
<b>STATEWIDE</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>1.24</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.86</b>



**Figure 1.** Statewide average rabbit count for Agents' Roadside Survey, July 1-15, 1983-2004.



**Figure 2.** Missouri zoogeographic regions



**Figure 3.** Missouri's rabbit harvest during 1967-2003 as estimated from post- season random mail survey of resident and non-resident small game permit holders.